

Using Online Delivery to Support Students during Practicum Placements.

Finding ways to effectively support students while on placement remains a continuing endeavor for those who teach in professional education programs. In this article the multiple challenges and learning opportunities that social work students encounter during practicum learning will be discussed. Next, drawing from constructivist pedagogy and using authentic examples from an online discussion board, ways to supplement the support and educational input provided to students on placement will be demonstrated. Finally, some of the risks and limitations in engaging with online delivery are examined with the view to understanding how e-learning can be facilitated most effectively for students during the practicum.

Keywords: Student; Placement; Online; Constructivist

The practicum has long been acknowledged as being the most powerful and memorable aspect of student professional learning across a wide range of disciplines (Kadushin, 1991). While the dynamic nature of learning in the authentic workplace, with genuine clients and practice dilemmas is well documented, recent research on practicum learning has identified students experience considerable stress during their field placements. In particular students report stress as a result of unsatisfactory supervision arrangements, and problematic work place practices (Gedeye 1996; Chapman & Orb, 2001); encounter financial hardship (Maidment, 2003); have concerns with balancing practicum and personal interests, and managing workload (Murray-Harvey, Slee, Lawson, Silins, Banfield & Russell, 1999); and experience a lack of theory/ practice integration (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996).

In addition to the personal stressors experienced by students, agencies are themselves operating in a climate of considerable economic constraint, where risk assessment is routinely used to allocate scarce resources (Parton, 1996), and where the potential for litigation, media criticism and client complaint are ever present. Not surprisingly, the contemporary authentic workplace, with its focus on competitive processes, outcome orientation and emphasis on hierarchy provides a somewhat antithetical context in which to apply adult learning approaches (Hughes, 1998: 214).

Together, these influences form a potent mix of rather adverse conditions under which students endeavour to make their initial forays into the field of practice. Fortunately increasing interest in developing practicum education, and recent research in this area has made tertiary institutions more aware of the challenges inherent in work-based learning. To this end additional ways of supporting students in the field are being sought. Using online technology to offer supplementary assistance and input is one way tertiary education providers have found to address some of the problems experienced by students during the practicum.

Constructivism and Learning Online

Not surprisingly, the use of online technology in education has been paralleled by increased recognition of constructivist pedagogy to guide teaching and learning processes. Constructivism provides a framework to develop curriculum and inform the process of student learning online. Meanwhile rapidly developing hyper technology provides the tools for individual students placed in geographically scattered agencies to still participate in collective and collaborative learning encounters.

The antecedent principles for constructivism can be found in the work of Vygotsky(1930s), an educational theorist who was both a teacher and researcher. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory had as its central imperatives notions of experiential learning, socially constructed meaning making, networking, active learning and participation. From this perspective individual cognitive development is conceptualised as emerging out of social situations, and as such learning is non-linear and based on the way individual students interpret their own experiences

(Jaramillo, 1996: 135). Subsequently, Vygotsky's work has been a major influence in shaping constructivist pedagogy, where knowledge construction is understood as individual cognitive development influenced by experiences in the learning environment through authentic social interactions (Bostock, 1998). As such a constructivist paradigm is consistent with adult learning approaches, and is particularly pertinent to examining ways to enhance practicum teaching and learning.

Using this paradigm students' previous life experiences become integral to how s/he negotiates and responds to current learning activities. Seagrave and Holt provide a succinct summary of the constructivist learning process in the following way. They note that learning is goal oriented, personally meaningful/ relevant and active is reflective, collaborative and inclusive and involves learning in partnership (Seagrave & Holt, 2002: 11-12)

The following discussion demonstrates how online asynchronistic discussion can be used to promote collaborative, reflective, inclusive and meaningful learning during the practicum. In this context the asynchronistic discussion involves students accessing an online notice board where they write questions, ideas and their responses to other student postings in an ongoing way throughout the semester. These 'virtual' discussions do not take place in real time but are developed by students contributing to the noticeboard at a time that is convenient to them.

Using asynchronistic discussion during the practicum

One way to address problems of student stress, lack of theory/practice integration and isolation in the field, is to provide additional support and input online to supplement

the placement learning. Through the use of online asynchronistic discussion students are able to have informal contact with their peers who are also on placement contending with similar issues. In addition, with guidance from a course facilitator, students can use the asynchronistic discussion forum to develop and publish their own ideas, receive feedback from others in relation to postings, and work in groups to complete specific projects. Each of these activities is cognizant with a constructivist paradigm where students reflect upon and share their placement experiences with others in the field, and through a process of discussion and receiving contributions from others, create meaning (sic learning) from their own encounters.

The following examples drawn from an asynchronistic discussion board illustrate constructivist learning principles in action. At this point it is important to note that students contributing to the discussion board were all out on placement for the first time, were located in geographically disparate locations throughout Australia, and were a mixed group in terms of their internal/ external mode of study. All students had met each other face to face in residential classes held earlier in the program. It is not possible however to generalize for the class how well the students knew each other personally before contributing to the online noticeboard.

Students quoted in the comments below have given permission in writing for their postings to be used in this article, chose their own pseudonyms and were aware that their contributions were not part of a formal research process.

In this first instance the *developmental* milestones of practicum learning was evident, with students noting the following:

Beginning of Placement:

I took my first phone call in the second week of placement. I was nervous as the health Service have a duty system ...I put it off for as long as I could and now I feel real confident, there are still some tricky calls but overall I am confident I am referring to the right person or agency...The next step is working face to face with clients on our own

(Theresa)

While this posting clearly demonstrates an event that is personally meaningful to the student, it also normalizes the anxiety students often feel when beginning first placement. Following this introduction there were several other postings by students to the noticeboard discussing how the 'first phone call' and 'first interview' progressed. In this way the asynchronistic forum was used as a means to reflect and facilitate inclusiveness between the students.

Midway through placement

I have been learning heaps, and updating my skills in the area of working one on one with clients, court support and knowing the 'system'. I have achieved particularly good results with my youth group and I really enjoy working with them. I am focusing the remainder of my placement on improving my skills when working with men particularly angry men, as I find this is a personal challenge for me.

(Louise)

This posting illustrates Seagrave & Holts (2002) principles of constructivist pedagogy being goal oriented and reflective. A student near the end of her placement made the next posting. This contribution demonstrates how the aysynchronistic discussion was used to capture the learning that was both personally meaningful and relevant to the student.

End of placement

I have learnt that I cannot always be a 'nice' person in terms of helping people, which is probably always the idea that I've had in my head as a social worker role. Often as social workers we have to challenge people about their thinking, and they often don't appreciate this at the time. I have to learn that whatever role I'm in, people may not like what I do as a worker because it probably impacts greatly on their lives. I know that within child protection this has been a huge 'hurdle' for me. I don't like the thought that people don't like me!!...I think another big area of learning for me is that social work is not

only about counseling, it is sooooo much more. It can be about writing reports about the agency's annual audit, or about attending an expo, putting up a display board and standing around for a few hours without actually having any client contact. Above all, the placement has really made me believe that social work is for me because I'd been going through a period where I was questioning that (I may do that again in the future too I'm sure). Take care. Kelly

Students responded to each others postings and asked questions of clarification that prompted further reflection as the next posting to Kelly from Marian illustrates...

Congratulations on completing your first placement, it sounds as if it has been a really useful time up there. I bet you can't wait to be settled at home again. I remember at the placement seminar you were worried about making the adjustment from Child Protection Worker to a more therapeutic role with clients - how do you feel about that now?
(Marian)

Personal Issues

As the next two examples illustrate, students used the asynchronistic forum to discuss personal issues. In this way the discussion board provided a means to share news, connect with peers and access support and input from others. Hence the opportunity to connect online facilitated participation from students scattered geographically across all states in Australia. This inclusive participatory style is integral to utilizing constructivist pedagogy in teaching and learning.

One month into full time work and the cracks are starting to appear in the home life. After 12 nearly continuous years of being home for my children they are starting to react to the change. Although I am enjoying my experiences in the work place my children are not. I guess it is a big change for them-more so because my husband returned to inter-state truck driving the week before I started. So I guess in a way we have both abandoned them. Is anyone else finding similar things?

(Narelle)

I was all set to try to get 'on-line' last Wednesday. My daughter 'insisted' on having lunch with me. We arranged it for 12md - I thought okay I'll be back by 1pm. That was until my daughter informed me that I am going to be a grandmother! Well everything else went out of my mind for the rest of the day. Even though this was a 'surprise' my daughter and her partner are extremely

pleased. Now that my partner and I have adjusted to the idea of becoming grandparents - we are really excited !! (Marion)

Mutual Learning

The notice board also provided a forum for students to ask questions of others about their fields of practice, dilemmas and policy issues. The following question was asked of two students on placement in a rural community...

Hi it's Helen here. I've been reading your postings on the site with a little interest as I lived in (small country town) from when I was 8 until I was 18. I was wondering what is your impression of the access to services in the district and community. And have you identified gaps in service provision? (Helen)

This posting was responded to in the following way...

Hey Helen, how are you? Thanks for your email! I'll try to answer the questions as best I can, although we've only been here for 14 weeks. I've been working for the (name of agency), and so I've had an opportunity to see and hear some of the issues facing rural communities.

Access to services? In (name of rural community) you don't have a lot of choice. If you don't like one practitioner, there's not always somewhere else to go. There's lots of stigma in rural areas about things like mental illness, so there's an awful lot of people who go to Melbourne for services. So even though there's access in town, people don't always feel free to use services.

For those people living in the smaller towns around, like...(names of small Victorian towns), there are many issues of isolation. There are issues because there is no public transport system. The school buses are never full, yet the Dept of Education doesn't allow people other than school kids to ride on school buses, which is OK in urban areas, but makes it really difficult in small townships. On a positive note, there is a rural access program running right now, with an emphasis on people with a disAbility. I don't know much about the project, but there are changes happening! Is the quality of life affected by lack of resources? You bet your bottom dollar! It's interesting to note that \$2 of every \$3 export dollars made by Australia comes from prime producers in rural areas, yet the governments of Australia are so unwilling to put dollars back into rural communities. (Melissa)

The above posting demonstrates how Melissa constructed her meaning making about life in a rural community from her practice experience. She has linked the practice knowledge gained from the placement with local politics, social policy issues and notions of stigma, isolation and service delivery considerations.

In this last posting the student asks for feedback from others regarding a question of ethics, relating directly to her field of practice...

I am working in (name of primary school). This situation hasn't actually happened to me, but there is a possibility that it may. I am not sure if it is an ethical dilemma or just a general dilemma and if it did happen I was wondering if other people could give me suggestions on what to do. I am working with a young boy with a severe behavioural problem and one of the things he does is steal things from shops, for example Safeway. My problem is if I saw in him Safeway one day stealing something what would I do??? Pretend not to see him, say hi but pretend I don't know what he is doing, tell him he shouldn't be stealing, report it???? Maybe you guys have other suggestions.
(Gillian)

In this posting the student is seeking suggestions and ideas from the rest of her class.

She has considered the topic of ethics that was put up by the course facilitator and related it to her own placement. This student's posting elicited many responses from peers where other ethical dilemmas were raised, and these in turn were related to the Lowenberg & Dolgoff model of ethical decision making (1988), and the AASW Code of Ethics (2002). The posting above demonstrates an example of where the constructivist notions of reflective, collaborative learning were generated through using the online forum.

Thus far this article has identified how online asynchronistic discussion can be readily used to facilitate constructivist-learning opportunities for social work students on placement in the field. Nevertheless students, teachers, educational designers and practitioners have critiqued online delivery of education on numerous levels. Without understanding the limitations of educational delivery online, it is not possible to integrate strategies to address these shortcomings.

Limitations of E-learning

Some early attempts to develop online learning have simply consisted of uploading electronic versions of study guides, readings and exercises. This indiscriminate transfer of material from hardcopy to electronic versions in no way constitutes a process for learning online (Sims, 2001). Further criticisms by students and educators of the online environment have cited the lack of readily available technical assistance when problems arise (Wilkinson, 1999); increased financial outlay for students to cover the costs of both hardware and software (McCourt & Kilduff, 2002); lack of evaluative research on e-learning outcomes (Bloom & Hanych, 2002); the high dependency on text based communication, lack of visual cues, and the time consuming nature of creating an 'online presence' in the virtual classroom (Gordon Smith, Ferguson & Caris, 2001). These shortcomings are in addition to the ever-present problem of the digital divide between those who can and those who cannot access education via the net for differing reasons (Adegoke, 2002; DeOllos & Morris, 2002; Kenny, 2003), along with unclear expectations regarding ownership of material online (Agger-Gupta, D. 2002),

Together, the list of concerns noted above provide substantial ammunition for those wishing to discredit online teaching and learning efforts. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that this mode of delivery is essentially in its infancy compared to the traditional face-to-face lecture format. As such it is essential to contextualise online learning within this historical framework to understand that development will be evolutionary in nature, emerging out of identified need, and a growing body of evaluative research into this form of educational delivery (Bullock & DeStefano, 2001).

Where to from here?

In order for students to glean the most support, information and participation from any online platform it is essential they are able to access and use the facility without undue difficulty. On occasions institutions have introduced online delivery without sufficient student or educator training in its use. This creates time consuming and frustrating problems for both students and their lecturers to overcome. Firstly, before utilising any technology to support placement learning, it is critical that students have had an opportunity to either work through an online tutorial, or attend a face to face computer laboratory session where they can be stepped through the procedures in a practical way and have opportunity to ask questions. In addition, it is critical that the educational institutions have user-friendly technical assistance available to students. Too often the much cited connection to a 'Helpline' that students are advised to contact is not helpful at all, creating further barriers and resistance to working online.

Secondly, educational institutions need to be clear with host agencies that students will require some access to the internet while on placement, acknowledging that this may be on a limited basis. While many students have their own internet connections at home some do not, thus limiting their opportunities to link with others online during the field placement. Even so, we know that some internet service provider connections in very rural and remote communities in Australia are not reliable, and as such alternative ways to foster communication between students in these areas will need to be sought.

Thirdly, the potentially complex issues related to ownership of material posted online, ethics, and confidentiality, warrant a great deal more attention from those educational

institutions using both asynchronistic and synchronistic discussion forums. Any course offering online participation would ideally provide information and guidelines to students regarding these matters *before* facilitating teaching and learning interactions online.

Conclusion

The online environment has the potential to be used by students during the practicum to garner support, information, advice, and nurture collaborative learning opportunities. It is an additional resource that institutions can use to supplement and support the learning students are doing while out in the field. In the post modern world of virtual reality it can also be seen to parallel workplace reflective practices, in providing debriefing, peer support and review for students who would otherwise be isolated. Nevertheless, it is important to understand also the limitations inherent within online delivery, and work towards overcoming these obstacles in a practical fashion. The immediate issue is to develop a framework acceptable to educators, students and workplaces that can legitimize the use of on line delivery in a safe and confidential way, in order for students to learn and share through reflection. This work will be developmental in nature over the next few years, and will entail using a critical perspective to evaluate the ethical, pedagogical and practical aspects of working online. Like most practice developments this process needs to be supported as it unfolds, and not just resisted on the basis of conservative dogma. Through systematically addressing the issues identified in this paper it will in time be possible to foster strong additional educational supports for students online while they are undertaking their field placements.

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